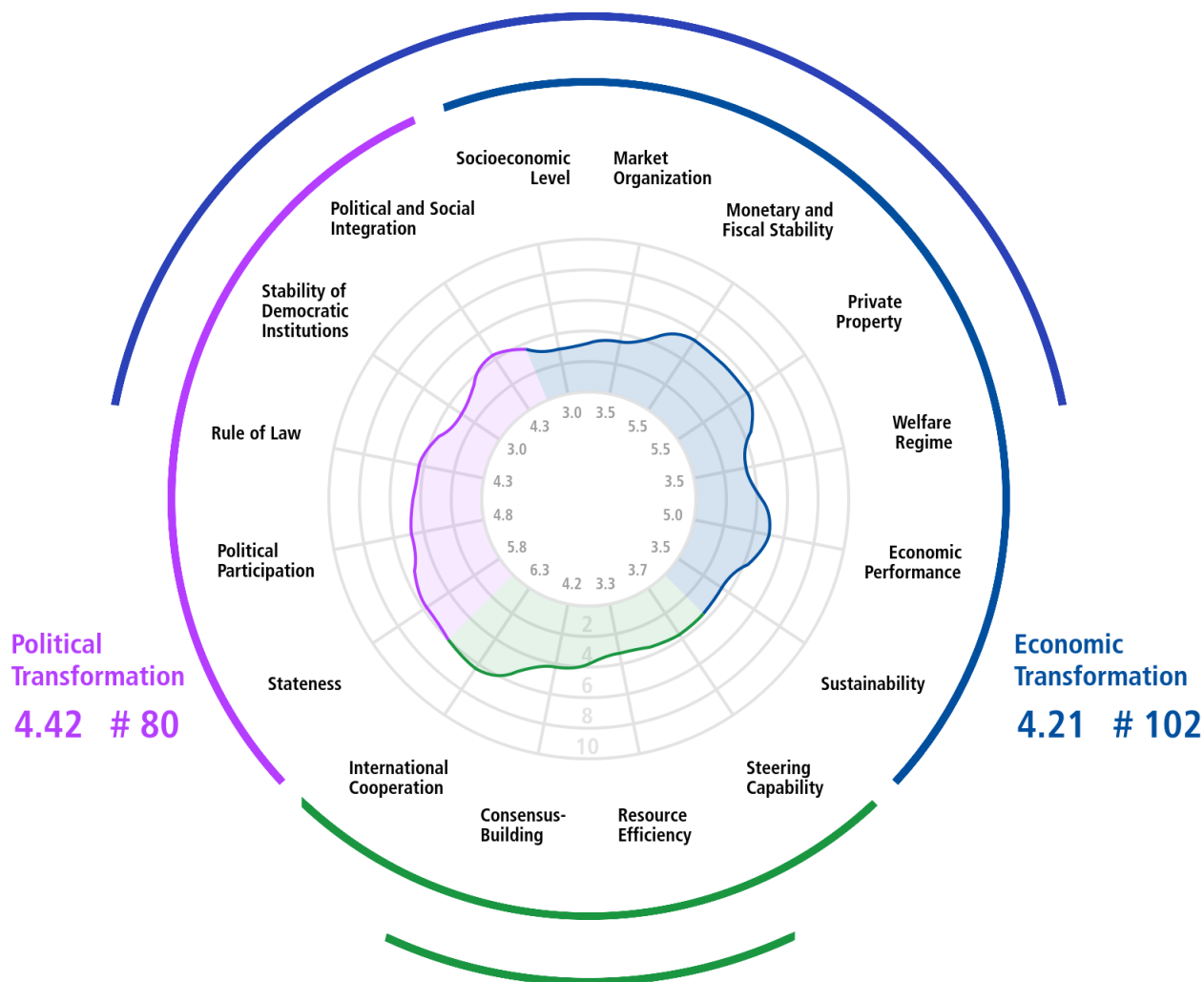


Mauritania

Status Index

4.32 # 95

on 1-10 scale out of 137



Political Transformation
4.42 # 80

Economic Transformation
4.21 # 102

Governance Index

4.11 # 90

on 1-10 scale out of 137

This report is part of the **Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2024**. It covers the period from February 1, 2021 to January 31, 2023. The BTI assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries. More on the BTI at <https://www.bti-project.org>.

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Key Indicators

Population	M	4.7	HDI	0.556	GDP p.c., PPP \$	6424
Pop. growth ¹	% p.a.	2.6	HDI rank of 189	158	Gini Index	32.6
Life expectancy	years	64.4	UN Education Index	0.424	Poverty ³	% 26.2
Urban population	%	56.9	Gender inequality ²	0.632	Aid per capita \$	92.1

Sources (as of December 2023): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | UNDP, Human Development Report 2021-22. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$3.65 a day at 2017 international prices.

Executive Summary

The period under review was characterized by President Ould Ghazouani's attempt to consolidate his authority, confirming an inflexible paradigm in Mauritanian politics as the new president (active or retired, elected or not) attempts to secure office by neutralizing his predecessor, no matter how close they were. With the country about to hold its first legislative, regional and local elections since Ould Ghazouani came to power in May 2023, and with the next presidential election scheduled for 2024, the president's quest to consolidate power has taken three forms. The first form involves ensuring that the ruling party is fully under his control, with allies of the former president co-opted or neutralized. Former president Ould Abdel Aziz's attempt to maintain control over the party after the presidential election, as well as influence in military circles and some business networks, explains Ould Ghazouani's robust handling of his predecessor. This also explains the rebranding of the ruling party in July 2022, from the Union pour la république (UPR) to EL INSEF (an acronym that stands for "Equity"), thereby erasing Ould Abdel Aziz's authority as the creator of the UPR.

The second form involves ensuring that Ould Abdel Aziz is prevented by ongoing legal battles from returning to the national stage. However, this strategy is not without risk for the incumbent president. Having been one of Ould Abdel Aziz's closest partners for all these years and holding influential positions in the security apparatus under Aziz, Ghazouani cannot easily deny knowledge of the various schemes uncovered by the parliamentary inquiry.

Third, the new president and his government have sought to enhance their legitimacy by changing official discourse. Ghazouani has taken a more straightforward approach than his predecessors by openly acknowledging some of the country's most significant challenges. For example, the government has directly addressed sensitive subjects such as slavery and the alarming situation faced by the Haratin population. The government has also addressed concerns regarding hunger in rural areas and the marginalization of ethnic minority languages in the education system. This level of openness would have been deemed unimaginable just a few years ago. However, despite the impressive shift in official communications, it is clear that actual policy implementation falls short of bringing about substantial change in these areas.

On the economic and development front, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have once again revealed Mauritania's economic vulnerability. The country relies on highly volatile international prices for its main exports, which include iron ore, gold and fishery products. Additionally, Mauritania depends on cereal imports for approximately 80% of its national food consumption. These factors contribute to the country's economic instability.

The forthcoming commencement of natural gas production along the Mauritania-Senegal maritime border (Grand Tortue Ahmeyim) holds great promise for the country. The project has already attracted about \$5 billion in investment over the last six years. But this latest project seems to confirm a historical trend in which substantial investments, both domestic and foreign, are made in the extractive sector with very little impact on the rest of the economy. Consequently, the country remains heavily dependent on foreign aid to finance its social programs.

History and Characteristics of Transformation

Mauritania is a Sahelian country with a precarious and constrained environment. Since its independence in 1960, the majority of the population has relied on agriculture and pastoralism for their livelihoods, while the country's main sources of revenue have been the export of minerals (mostly iron ore) and fish, as well as substantial developmental aid. Severe droughts in the 1970s resulted in devastating socioeconomic consequences, including the destruction of livestock, waves of uncontrolled urban migration and significant pressure on arable land along the Senegal River Valley.

These socioeconomic problems were amplified by two key political issues. The first issue involves the politicization of identities between Arabic-speaking groups, composed of Bidhân (or “white Moors”) and Haratin (“black Moors”), and non-Arabic-speaking black African communities (e.g., Haalpulaaren, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana). Tensions erupted over education policies, land tenure and ethnic representation in the politico-bureaucratic apparatus.

Between 1989 and 1991, security forces – fueled by an “Arabization” ideology – deported approximately 80,000 black Africans to Senegal, assassinating hundreds, and dismissing thousands from civil and military service. Meanwhile, the Haratin, who are often treated as second-class citizens, continue to be socially, economically and politically marginalized. Haratin militants have actively worked toward transforming this situation.

The politicization of identities is intricately linked to the second major issue, that is, the intrusion of the military into politics. Mukhtar Ould Daddah, who had ruled over a civilian one-party regime since 1960, was ousted by the military in 1978 due to his disastrous involvement in the Western Sahara War. Since this coup in 1978, every head of state has been an active or retired military officer, with one exception between 2007 and 2008. Furthermore, between 1978 and 2019, every leadership change was achieved via a coup.

In 1991, Colonel Ould Taya agreed to adopt a liberal constitution and to organize multiparty elections. However, through the use of coercion and patronage, Ould Taya and his party dominated every presidential, legislative and local election, as have all his successors to date. Ould Taya was ousted by his closest collaborators in 2005. The military junta eventually organized municipal and legislative elections in 2006 and presidential elections in 2007, which led to the election of a civilian, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi. Seventeen months into his presidency, Abdellahi was ousted by the architects of the 2005 coup, General Ould Abdel Aziz and General Ould Ghazouani. General Ould Abdel Aziz then organized and won the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections, while his party, the Union for the Republic (UPR), won every legislative, regional and local election, including the 2018 elections.

In 2019, after several months of ambiguous signals – some of which suggested he would attempt to alter the constitution to retain power – Ould Abdel Aziz finally announced that he would not run for a third term in mid-2019. Instead, he relinquished his position to his close friend and collaborator, General Ould Ghazouani.

Ould Ghazouani won the 2019 presidential election, marking the country's first peaceful transfer of power between two presidents. However, supreme power remained within the same military circle. As Ould Abdel Aziz indicated his desire to maintain some influence, the new president allowed the National Assembly to create a parliamentary commission to investigate corruption during Ould Abdel Aziz's presidency. Aziz was eventually arrested, and – after nearly three years – his trial began on January 25, 2023. Following the pattern set by every military ruler since 1978, the new leader has taken steps to consolidate his authority, and exclude his predecessor and former collaborator.

Between 2005 and 2011, jihadist armed groups launched attacks on Mauritanian soil, targeting military garrisons and foreigners. However, no other attack was attempted after 2011. Nevertheless, the surge in violence in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger continues to pose a problem for Mauritania, as some Mauritians have joined armed groups that are active in those countries.

The BTI combines text analysis and numerical assessments. The score for each question is provided below its respective title. The scale ranges from 1 (worst) to 10 (best).

Transformation Status

I. Political Transformation

1 | Stateness

There were no direct threats to the state’s monopoly on coercion during the current period. However, violence is still on the rise in Mauritania’s neighborhood, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso, causing apprehension among Mauritians, especially along the country’s eastern and southern borders. Some Mauritians have joined armed groups operating in other countries, which is a source of concern for the government.

On the country’s easternmost border with Mali, in the region of Hodh al-Sharqi, there has been significant trafficking activity. However, observers believe that Mauritanian security forces tightly monitor these networks, both formally and informally. Nonetheless, Mauritians were reportedly killed by Malian forces in January and June 2022, and others were kidnapped in March 2022, possibly by Malian forces and Wagner mercenaries.

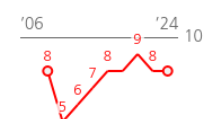
To the north, the tensions that broke out in late 2020 between the Algerian-supported Polisario Front and Moroccan forces have declined since 2021, but the situation remains precarious. In December 2021, Algeria and Mauritania agreed to build a paved road between Tindouf, the Algerian town where Polisario refugees have settled for decades, and Zouerate, a Mauritanian mining town. Mauritanian authorities believe that this could boost economic development in the region and increase security capacities in this highly remote region.

Discussions about the very existence of the Mauritanian nation-state, what constitutes Mauritanian identity and who should be treated as a citizen have had a profound effect on Mauritanian politics since independence. Mauritania is a cultural mosaic in which the politics of identity has always been central to its political system. Although the first Mauritanian president referred to the country as a “hyphen” (trait-d’union) between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, the dominant narrative presented by the Bidhan political leadership has typically prioritized Mauritania’s “Arabness.”

Question
Score

Monopoly on the
use of force

8



1

State identity

6



1

Minority groups have reacted in different ways: some have called for equal treatment, others for full recognition of Mauritania's ethno-racial diversity and a very small minority for secession. Hence, inequalities based on ethnic or racial differences have always affected both de jure and de facto citizenship.

Two communities face major challenges: the non-Arabic-speaking ethnic groups (Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana, sometimes grouped under the label "black Africans"), who have historically lived along the border with Senegal and Mali; and the Haratin (or "freed slaves"), who have historically been attached to the Moors (or Bidhân). Some individuals from these communities have been symbolically appointed to high-ranking positions, but this cannot conceal their general exclusion.

Tensions between black Africans and the government erupted in 1966 over language and education policies, and have persisted ever since, including during an education reform in 2022. A significant issue connected to this is their lack of representation and marginalization from key positions within the state apparatus, such as the presidency, high-ranking positions in the military, and in crucial ministries such as defense, justice and interior.

The exclusion of black Africans has been consolidating after hundreds of black Africans were killed between 1987 and 1991, and roughly 80,000 were sent into exile. The 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects security personnel involved in the assassination and deportation of ethnic minorities, has yet to be repealed. According to civil society organizations, the inclusion of black African citizens is further undermined by discriminatory census and civil registration processes, with many black Africans having faced informal obstacles when attempting to obtain identity cards and being excluded from the official registry.

In August 2021, the government implemented a new system for managing the population register, and securing documents for citizens and foreigners. However, in June 2022, the director of the agency in charge of the population register was sacked. Black African associations accused him of intentionally making it more difficult for their community to be registered. His termination was viewed as a positive step forward. Meanwhile, Haratin – who are considered "freed slaves" and carry the stigma of having served Bidhân families in the past, as well as current informal slaves – continue to face extremely challenging circumstances.

To address this issue, the government passed a law in 2007 to criminalize all activities related to slavery. This was followed by another law in 2012, which removed the 10-year time limitation for prosecution. In August 2015, yet another law was enacted that categorizes the crimes of slavery as crimes against humanity. Additionally, the maximum sentence for such crimes was extended from 10 to 20 years. As part of these efforts, three criminal courts were established that focus exclusively on cases involving slavery.

In November 2021, the government issued a circular inciting magistrates and judicial police officers “to take the necessary measures for the strict application of laws against slavery and trafficking.” The Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights can now act as a civil party in slavery cases. However, human rights organizations and Haratin associations argue that these legal reforms have had little impact.

In May 2022, the U.N. Special Rapporteur found that very few “masters” of slaves were prosecuted, and even fewer were fined and jailed – mostly due to a lack of willingness and resources. To date, only one case – involving a father and a son – of former masters has been fully tried, resulting in a 20-year jail verdict.

Politically, the most vocal Haratin organizations have all faced repression. The most renowned activist, Biram Dah Abeid, ran in the 2019 presidential election for the Initiative pour la Resurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste (IRA) and finished second. Along with many members of his initiative, he has been arrested multiple times in the past. However, in December 2021, after years of being deemed illegal by the government, the IRA finally received official authorization.

Religious dogmas, and political and legal orders are closely intertwined, as Islam is the religion of the state. However, both Islamic and secular elements are found in Mauritania’s legal system.

The Criminal Code combines elements of both Shariah law and the French Penal Code. The code of personal status is mostly inspired by Islamic law. Yet, popular sovereignty, not God, is the foundation of most key state institutions, and Mauritania abides by most international conventions, including the Human Rights Charter.

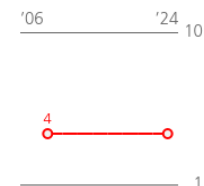
A 2017 law meant to fight discrimination in fact contains an article that provides for a jail sentence of one to five years for anyone who “holds an inflammatory speech against the official religious rite of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.” In July 2021, the government declared that it would not ratify U.N. recommendations on the abolition of the death penalty and the decriminalization of apostasy. Since 2020, no citizens have been arrested for apostasy or other similar acts.

Basic administration exists in Mauritania, but the country faces two major constraints. First, it has a challenging geography and demography, with a vast and mostly desertic territory and a very low population density, which have an impact on the state’s capacity to exercise its authority throughout the territory and provide basic administrative services. The administrative infrastructure has improved over the years, although with significant regional differences. The World Bank estimates that 47% of the population has access to electricity.

Second, from a sociopolitical perspective, not all communities have access to the same services. Haratin and many black African communities are particularly affected. In recent years, the state has put forward some health care and basic social safety net programs targeted at the poorest groups. Sanitation, especially in rural areas, remains

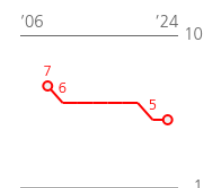
No interference of religious dogmas

4



Basic administration

5



a challenge. In 2019, it was estimated that only 15% of the rural population had access to sanitation. Access to water in this mostly desert country is a challenge, but progress has been made. According to the World Bank, in 2020, 78% of the population had access to basic drinking water services, compared to 40% in 2010.

Given that access to state services is often predicated upon an individual's connection to clientelistic networks and to group identity, Haratin may have lower chances of successfully petitioning judicial and police authorities than Bidhân (“White Moors”).

Mauritania's judicial apparatus is present throughout the country. All administrative regions have courts, but most are understaffed, underfunded and undermined by arbitrary decisions. The Mauritanian Tax Agency and the State General Inspectorate are functioning state agencies.

Basic infrastructure has also been improved in response to security threats. Roads, customs offices and security facilities were built with a particular focus on border regions near Mali in the southeast, as well as near Morocco and Algeria.

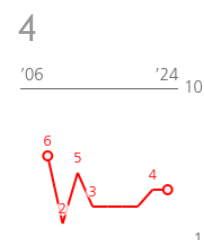
2 | Political Participation

There were no national elections during the period under review. The next legislative elections will be held in May 2023, and the next presidential elections will take place in 2024. No sitting president has ever lost an election in Mauritania because the incumbent can count on the support of the state apparatus, key economic actors and the ruling party. Notably, the ruling party changed its name in 2022 from Union pour la République to El INSAF (an acronym that stands for “Equity”). This change signaled an attempt by the new president, Ould Ghazouani, to move away from the legacy of his predecessor, who is still under house arrest, and to appoint his own loyal supporters. As of January 2023, the El INSAF website still has numerous posts that use the party's previous name, suggesting that the name change was mostly a cosmetic one. The ruling party holds an absolute majority at all levels.

It is unclear whether the political party affiliated with the abolitionist movement, the Radical Party for a Global Action, will be able to compete, given that the Interior Ministry continues to oppose the party's request to be officially recognized. Five of its militants were arrested in September 2022, and the police raided one of its political meetings in May 2022.

The Independent National Electoral Commission is in charge of preparing, organizing and supervising the elections; its members are appointed by the president. Six seats in the commission go to the ruling party and five to opposition parties. Its chair, Dah Ould Abdel Jelil, was nominated by the president in November 2022. He was previously minister of the interior under President Ould Taya.

Free and fair elections



In the 2019 presidential election, the African Union’s Electoral Observation Mission stated that “it found that voting was generally free and secret.” Apart from the AU mission, the only other observers came from the Mauritanian National Forum of Human Rights Associations, which did not report any major problems on election day.

Problems erupted immediately after the election. Ould Ghazouani declared himself the winner before the electoral commission had published the official results. Opposition parties and protesters immediately criticized and condemned the results. In response, the government blocked access to the internet, and police stormed opposition party headquarters and arrested several political actors, activists and journalists, including Haratin and black African candidates. Dozens were arrested in the Senegal River Valley’s main towns, where the majority of black Africans live.

The military holds de facto veto power in Mauritania. Since 1978, the president has, with one exception, been an active or retired military officer. The Mauritanian political system is characterized by its hyper-presidentialism. Formal rules and informal practices contribute to the concentration of power in the hands of the president, reducing the power of elected assemblies, namely the National Assembly, the regional councils and local municipal councils. Since the establishment of elected institutions in 1991, the president’s party (which has had several different names over the years) has always controlled a majority of elected seats.

The fact that the National Assembly launched an investigation into former president Ould Abdel Aziz does not suggest that the legislative power has suddenly asserted its independence from the executive, which is led by a retired officer. Rather, it should be seen as a strategy used by the current president’s camp to politically eliminate the president’s predecessor and rival who had tried to maintain some influence over the ruling party and in elite circles.

Following some liberalization efforts in the early 1990s, it has been easier for citizens to form and join independent political and civil society groups, and for those groups to operate with a certain degree of liberty. Beyond what the law says, the prohibition of certain organizations and the arrest of activists generally depend on the context and the immediate interests of the regime.

The right of association is protected by Article 11 of the constitution. Opposition parties and NGOs are allowed to exist. Between 1991 and 2020, however, the regime imposed harsh restrictions on civil society organizations via a rule that enabled the Ministry of Interior to reject requests for official recognition by any organization.

This changed following the introduction of the Law of the Freedom of Association in 2021, which abolished the obligation to obtain formal authorization. Now, associations simply have to notify the Ministry of Interior of their establishment and their statutes. They also have the right to receive foreign funding, which they could not before. With this new law, only a court can suspend an organization. Some international organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, noticed that the new law

Effective power to govern

2

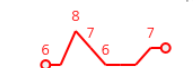
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Association / assembly rights

7

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still contains major hurdles, including civil society organizations' obligation to define and limit themselves to a "main domain of intervention." It also provides for vague definitions of justifications that could lead to their disbandment, such as "activities likely to threaten public order and morality."

In the past, Haratin organizations were frequently harassed, and their members were arrested and prosecuted. Most notably, the IRA movement, an anti-slavery movement representing the Haratin, was systematically denied any official recognition until the government changed its position in December 2021. Yet, in early 2023, the government continues to refuse to officially authorize the IRA's political party, the RAG.

Several members of the black African organization *Touche pas à ma nationalité* (TPMN) were arrested in November 2022 during demonstrations in Nouakchott and other towns to denounce the amnesty granted to military personnel who committed atrocities against black Africans between 1989 and 1991. Notwithstanding these events, overall, there have been fewer cases of harassment and arrests of activists during the period under review.

Freedom of expression has improved slightly since the 2019 election, with fewer cases of harassment against journalists than previously. Article 10 of the constitution guarantees freedom of expression. It is counterbalanced by more repressive laws, such as Article 348 of the penal code, which provides for jail sentences in defamation cases. Furthermore, in 2018, Mauritania adopted a new law that increases the punishment for blasphemy, with the death penalty automatically imposed if a person found guilty of apostasy does not repent within 72 hours.

The government's influence over the media landscape is visible in the nomination process of the High Authority for the Press and Audiovisual Sector. Three of the authority's six board members are appointed by the president. The remaining three are appointed by the National Assembly, which in reality is under the control of the presidential party.

A number of cases continued to raise concerns regarding freedom of expression. A new law was adopted in June 2020 to tackle the problem of "fake news" on social media. Critics have noted that the terms and definitions put forward by the law are so vague that it could be used to harass activists and journalists who publish posts or articles that are deemed excessively critical of the government. Blogger Hamda Ould Oubeidallah was arrested in early 2022 and received a six-month prison sentence for posting a series of videos on his Facebook page criticizing the government. Another blogger, Mohamed Ould Yacoub, was arrested in May 2022 after he had posted a video claiming one of his friends had found counterfeit ouguiya bills. In April 2021, journalist Abdellahi Mohamed Ould Atigh was arrested and detained for two days following an accusation by the minister of social affairs, who said the journalist had defamed her in a Facebook post that alleged her ministry may have divested funds intended to help vulnerable populations during the pandemic.

Freedom of
expression

6



1

3 | Rule of Law

The Mauritanian political system remains hyper-presidentialist. The 1991 constitution – slightly amended in 2006 and 2017 – provides for a semi-presidential system heavily tilted in favor of the executive branch. The president is directly elected by the population. The president has power of decree and extensive powers of appointment, which allow the president to unilaterally and without veto power from another institution appoint almost all top positions in the state apparatus, including half of the most important judicial institution, the Constitutional Council. Three other members of this council are named after a proposal by the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly.

The president has the power to dissolve the National Assembly, while it cannot impeach him. However, the National Assembly can pass a vote of no confidence against the prime minister and his cabinet, which is appointed by the president. In 2017, the constitution was revised, leading to the abolition of the Senate and its replacement by six regional councils, all elected by universal suffrage.

Beyond this formal institutional architecture lies an informal institutional configuration whereby the president, high-ranking military officers and economically affluent businessmen wield significant political influence. When tensions among them reach a high level, either the president eliminates his rivals, usually former friends and allies, or is eliminated. This has been the pattern since 1978, with coups temporarily resolving the tension.

The independence of the judiciary is guaranteed by the constitution. However, the centralized presidential system provides the president with major powers over the judiciary. As noted, the president appoints half of the six judges sitting in the Constitutional Court and the chair of the Supreme Court.

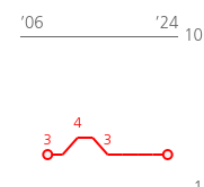
Informal practices also weaken the judiciary. It is often reported that Moors are overrepresented in the judiciary, and specifically those from the “clerical” tribes (Zwâya); Haratin and black Africans are believed to be under-represented.

Furthermore, outside of the capital city, tribunals in each of the departments (moughata’a) and regions (wilayat), which include the criminal, civil, labor and commerce courts, are often accused of being influenced by political and economic considerations, in addition to facing human and material shortages.

Since the transition in 1991, the person elected chair of the Mauritanian Bar Association has usually been a lawyer closely connected to the ruling party and the president. But in 2020, the Bar Association elected Brahim Ould Ebetty, a historical figure within the country’s human rights and democracy movement known as a vocal critic of past governments who has defended many victims of political repression. It is notable that the authorities have not tried to undermine his election.

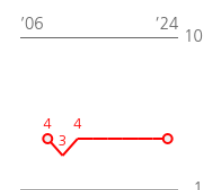
Separation of powers

3



Independent judiciary

4



The independence of the judiciary will be tested in the trial of former president Ould Abdel Aziz and other high-ranking officials (including two former prime ministers and former ministers), which began in January 2023. These men have been accused of corruption and other economic crimes. Even if the current president and many active state officials have worked closely with the former president, they are not being held accountable.

The leading state agencies in charge of holding public servants and politicians accountable are the Court of Accounts, the State General Inspectorate and a number of more specialized agencies, such as the Finance General Inspectorate, which is embedded in the Ministry of Finance.

The State General Inspectorate has the power to investigate all public institutions. The fact that all its chairs have been prominent members of the ruling party raises doubts about its capacity and willingness to investigate and hold high-ranking public servants accountable.

The State General Inspectorate has launched a series of investigative missions, some of which led to the sacking of a few high-ranking public servants and many more low-ranking ones. Following inspections, the head of the Nouakchott Port was eventually dismissed (April 2022) and the head of the Nouadhibou Port was arrested (January 2022). In March 2022, the State General Inspectorate sent inspection missions into five ministries, the results of which have not been communicated. Investigations in other institutions resulted in 20 civil servants being arrested and sent to jail, though no trials have yet been held.

The Court of Accounts remained largely quiet for many years until 2019, when its actions became more visible. The publication of its annual reports, which are supposed to be public, remains a significant problem, in addition to delays in their publication. In the aftermath of the publication of the last report, two director generals of public agencies – Development and Public Works, and Water Wells and Drilling – were fired.

In March 2022, the Cour des Comptes published its special report on the management of the COVID-19 Special Funds. It revealed some irregularities but has not identified any major problems. However, the most significant case of public officeholders' alleged corruption and mismanagement remains that of former president Ould Abdel Aziz, whose trial began in January 2023. Following the publication in 2020, of the Parliamentary Investigative Commission, which investigated the cases of corruption under the Ould Abdel Aziz regime (2009 – 2019), it was revealed that 317 politicians, civil servants and businessmen with close ties to Ould Abdel Aziz were involved in embezzlement and influence peddling. The former president was eventually arrested along with several of his relatives, several former ministers and two prime ministers.

Prosecution of
office abuse

5

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1

Under the Ould Ghazouani presidency, violations of civil rights have slightly receded. Improvements include the official recognition of the leading association that defends the rights of Haratin. This will be an additional tool in the defense of the most oppressed minority in the country.

In October 2022, the attorney general of the Supreme Court visited several regional courts across the country to encourage local judges to rigorously apply the law against perpetrators of acts of slavery and trafficking, in other words, to apply the 2015 law that criminalizes slavery and human trafficking in practice. However, the actual capacity of enslaved individuals to seek justice is hampered by administrative and political obstacles, as the U.N. Special Rapporteur explained in his May 2022 report.

With respect to discrimination against women, the creation of the National Observatory of Women and Girls' Rights in 2020 and the nomination of its first chair in December 2021 may seem to be a positive trend in the fight against gender discrimination. However, the actual capacity of the observatory to push for changes in practice remains the main challenge. A proposed law on the eradication of violence against women and girls, presented to the National Assembly in 2016, has still not been adopted due to the opposition of many elected officials and religious leaders.

Concerning violations of black African minorities, Ould Ghazouani holds the same position as all his predecessors, maintaining the Law of Amnesty of 1993, which prohibits any investigation and prosecution of military officers involved in acts of assassination and torture against black African minorities between 1989 and 1991. Some of the officers involved in these dramatic events are still active today.

4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

In Mauritania, democratic institutions are part of a competitive authoritarian regime and do not perform according to their functions and to common democratic norms. From a formal perspective, elections have been held regularly, including elections for the president, the National Assembly, the Senate (1992 – 2017) and subsequently the regional councils (since 2018), and municipal councils. Elections are supervised by the Independent National Electoral Commission, with support from the Interior Ministry.

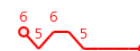
The 1991 constitution provides for the separation of powers. However, military officers have governed the country since 1978, with the exception of 18 months of civilian rule, which began and ended with the direct intervention of the military (2007 – 2008). Since the coups of 2005 and 2008, opposition candidates can stand for election. However, they are systematically defeated by the presidential party.

The presidential party's name was changed to EL INSAF in 2022, confirming a pattern by which the new strongman imprints his mark on the ruling party. Nevertheless, the inner workings of the ruling party remain the same, with close ties to the state apparatus and complete control over all elected assemblies.

Civil rights

5

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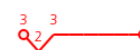


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Performance of democratic institutions

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In 2018, the largest opposition party had only 14 seats out of 147. There has never been any alternation in power in Mauritania. It seems unlikely that a truly competitive election could be held at the presidential level or at the legislative level. The forthcoming legislative, regional and local elections to be held in May 2023 will tell if this pattern will prevail. If the gap (in terms of number of seats and percentage of votes) separating the presidential and opposition parties diminishes significantly, it could indicate that the political field becomes more competitive.

Democratic institutions, in their true essence, are not respected by the most powerful actors of the Mauritanian political system, the military, which has exerted a de facto veto power since 1978. In 2019, two presidents succeeded one another through an election for the first time. However, it did not alter the ongoing structural pattern of the Mauritanian political system, whereby active or retired military officers dominate at the apex of the state. Their hegemonic control is supported by the ruling party and its smaller allies, which control all elected assemblies through a system of patronage that penetrates all regions of the country, and incorporates national and local notables.

The most competitive political battles are not played out on a level playing field. Instead, the real competition takes place within the confines of the ruling party and the inner circles of the presidency. For their part, opposition parties, including the Islamist Tawassoul party, accept the democratic institutions as legitimate. Some of the most important opposition parties have at times boycotted elections, notably the 2017 referendum, the 2013 legislative and local elections, as well as the 2014 presidential elections. These boycotts were expressions of distrust regarding the fairness of the electoral processes (but not all opposition parties and candidates boycotted these elections, as some defected from the united front and decided to run). Civil organizations such as the Mauritanian National Forum of Human Rights Associations (FONADH), which brings together several associations, campaign for more democratic elections and institutions.

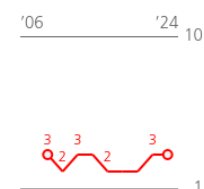
5 | Political and Social Integration

The party system in Mauritania reflects the overall model of the competitive authoritarian regime. While the presidential party has systematically won all elections since 1991, the margin separating the ruling party and the first opposition party in the National Assembly has slightly decreased over the years. The opposition party had only one seat in the 1990s, six in the 2000s, but obtained 14 in 2018.

The logic of the party system will most likely prevail in the forthcoming elections. It relies on the same patronage mechanism involving civil servants, supported by the numerous regional and local leaders across ethnic groups in rural areas, who “deliver the votes” during elections.

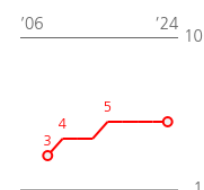
Commitment to democratic institutions

3



Party system

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Competition within the ruling party is intense; men and women who are not nominated as candidates often create their own small parties (though within the “presidential coalition”) and are brought back in after the election.

Opposition parties fail to form a united front to challenge the ruling party. The two historical opposition parties, Rassemblement des forces démocratiques and Union des forces du progrès, although still important, have seen their influence decline since the early 1990s, as the Islamist party has surpassed them. Oftentimes, the opposition parties are also internally divided. For instance, the Islamist party Tawassoul faced vivid internal divisions, with some young and rising figures expelled after they criticized the party for its weak position on issues concerning the Haratin.

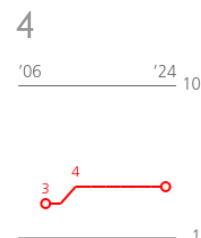
Some opposition parties have stronger connections in specific ethno-racial communities, such as the People’s Progressive Alliance (associated largely with the Haratin) or the AJD/MR (associated with the Haalpulaaren). The Islamist Tawassoul party has some support among ethnic minorities, but its attempts to build a truly multiethnic coalition have failed, and the party remains much stronger among White Moors and Haratin. The organization of the leading Haratin leader Biram Dah Abeid, the IRA, has finally been granted formal recognition by the government, although its demand to have its political party recognized has so far been denied.

The spectrum of interest groups, which ranges from informal networks to officially constituted organizations, tilts quite strongly toward the former. Most informal networks are based on tribal and ethnic ties, as well as personal connections built through one’s education curriculum, occupational and business experiences, and religious orientation (varying between Sufi brotherhoods and Salafi movements). Many of the networks have deep historical roots, but they can also be fluid and multifaceted, and are less visible but much more significant than the formal ones. Their relationship to the state or the government can change depending on what is at stake. But few clash in a direct confrontational way with the state.

Formal or legally recognized interest groups are much less numerous. They include the few trade unions representing civil servants, students and the workers of the small industrial sector (the General Confederation of Workers of Mauritania and the Free Union of Mauritanian Workers), as well as the employers’ association, and a large number of NGOs, many of which are empty shells, created by people related to state officials or politicians to capture international aid.

Only a few civil society associations play a significant role at the national and local level in addressing social problems, notably those dedicated to the interests of ethnic, racial and gender groups, such as the mainly Haratin movements IRA and SOS-esclaves, as well as the black African movement Touche pas à ma Nationalité (TPMN).

Interest groups



Some NGOs devoted to specific social issues have had some success in mobilizing local and international stakeholders, such as the Association of Female Heads of Households. In February 2022, the leader of this association, Aminetou Mint El Moctar, was attacked in a police station by a man who was angry that the Association of Female Heads of Households was legally representing a minor who accused him of sexual aggression.

There is no public opinion survey data available for Mauritania. It is important to note, however, that qualitative ethnographic and political science studies demonstrate that citizens belonging to marginalized communities (e.g., the Haratin and black Africans) have called upon the rule of law and democratic institutions to protect them against arbitrary abuse by state officials and powerful individuals with connections to the government. This suggests that many citizens value notions of protection from state abuse, fair representation, and the right to be treated fairly and justly. Turnout for the 2019 presidential election was 62%, which indicates that a large number of citizens made the decision to participate in this process. Observers will keep a close eye on the May 2023 legislative, regional and local elections to measure the level of popular participation.

Although no public opinion surveys are available, there is excellent qualitative research indicating that Mauritians are connected to various solidarity networks defined by village, tribal, professional and religious identities. Although trust and solidarity are key features of these networks, many of them are still characterized by hierarchical and vertical power relations. Age, gender, lineage and social status (or cast status) often structure these informal groupings. Furthermore, tribal, lineage and religious leaders command much respect, and their advice is often followed. This explains why the state works closely with most of these community leaders. Among the Bidhân population, tribal affiliation is often said to be the most important social linkage, where trust is at its strongest. Though this claim is in part accurate, the salience of rivalry among members of the same tribe should not be underestimated, especially among those who can aspire to an important political role. The most acute struggles often pit one tribal kin against the others.

Approval of
democracy

n/a

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Social capital

4

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II. Economic Transformation

6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Levels of poverty and inequality are high in Mauritania, primarily due to the dual nature of its economy. The mining (iron ore and gold), fishery and oil sectors generate around 75% of the country's revenues but offer limited employment opportunities, making these sectors vulnerable to dramatic shifts in global prices. For example, the price of iron ore has experienced substantial volatility in recent years – starting with a significant increase in April 2020, reaching \$85 per metric ton, and peaking at \$214 per metric ton in July 2021. However, it subsequently plummeted to approximately \$90 per metric ton in November 2022.

Employment in the formal public sector accounts for only 13% of total employment, while the agricultural and informal sectors, combined with remittances from the diaspora, as well as official and private foreign aid, make up the rest. Approximately 65% of the population relies on agriculture (including livestock) for their livelihoods, leading to a significant portion of the population living in precarious conditions. As noted in a September 2022 World Bank report, “most of its population continues to depend on agriculture and livestock for their livelihoods.”

The World Food Program estimated that 500,000 Mauritians faced acute food insecurity in July and August 2020 due to the droughts that impacted the region. Consequently, Mauritania ranks low (158th) in the Human Development Index (HDI) with a score of 0.556. The HDI loss due to inequality is 30%. Its Gini coefficient is 32.6 (the latest data available is from 2014). Additionally, 26% of the population lives on less than \$3.65 per day (at 2011 international prices adjusted for purchasing power parity, PPP).

In the 2022 Global Hunger Index, Mauritania ranked 87th out of 107. The World Food Program noted in 2022 that “agricultural production is low, covering only about 30% of the country's annual food needs.”

With respect to gender disparities, Mauritania's Gender Inequality Index is 0.632 and its Gender Development Index is 0.81. Other indicators pointing to gender inequalities include the maternal mortality ratio (deaths per 100,000 live births) at 766, while the mean years of schooling for females is 3.8 years.

All these indicators are national aggregates, which tend to conceal significant inequalities based on one's ethno-racial and “caste” identities. Haratin face difficult political barriers that make upward mobility challenging. This does not mean that all Bidhan individuals are well-to-do; rural villages and urban shantytowns have a large number of very poor Bidhan families, but it does imply that they are better represented in the upper strata of the socioeconomic ladder.

Question
Score

Socioeconomic
barriers

3

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Economic indicators		2019	2020	2021	2022
GDP	\$ M	8066.1	8405.5	9996.2	10375.5
GDP growth	%	5.3	-0.9	2.4	5.2
Inflation (CPI)	%	2.3	2.4	3.6	9.5
Unemployment	%	10.4	11.1	11.3	11.1
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	-11.0	11.0	10.7	11.1
Export growth	%	16.7	-8.6	-11.7	6.2
Import growth	%	11.9	2.1	25.1	10.1
Current account balance	\$ M	-831.1	-576.2	-807.9	-
Public debt	% of GDP	55.7	55.8	51.1	50.8
External debt	\$ M	5369.8	5714.2	4818.8	-
Total debt service	\$ M	382.4	292.9	414.0	-
Net lending/borrowing	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	12.2	12.9	14.6	16.1
Public education spending	% of GDP	1.8	1.8	1.7	1.3
Public health spending	% of GDP	1.2	1.3	-	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	2.0	2.4	2.3	2.3

Sources (as of December 2023): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database.

7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

Since the early 2000s, successive Mauritanian governments have partially deregulated and liberalized the country's economic environment. An IMF report from 2022 notes that "Mauritania exhibits a relatively high burden from government regulation, low quality of governance, and scarce access to financial services."

In the last decade, the government has reformed the legal frameworks that regulate economic activities. This includes the Mining Code, the Commerce Code, the Investments Code and the Customs Code – all adopted between 2014 and 2017. More recently, a reform of the Public Procurement Code was undertaken in 2021, and the Tax Code was adopted in 2019 to reduce informality and improve tax fairness.

The Investments Code is intended to attract foreign investment, and enhance the ease and security of capital mobility. It also permits expatriates to comprise up to 10% of the workforce of a foreign-owned company. Regarding the new 2021 Public Procurement Code, the government asserts that it will streamline the public procurement process. However, the opposition maintains that it actually eliminates essential checks on transactions and fosters embezzlement.

An important barrier to entry resides in the oligopolistic nature of the Mauritanian economy, whereby less than a dozen large conglomerates – controlled by specific Bidhan families and tribes – assert their control over most key economic sectors. Furthermore, the licensing regime, which acts as a clientelistic node, constitutes another important informal entry barrier.

It is estimated that the share of informal employment in total employment is 89.4% – similar, for instance, to Senegal at 90.2%. On that note, a 2022 IMF report found that "in Mauritania, informality remains high even among the wealthiest, consistent with the existence of an upper-income tier of informal workers whose employment decisions are driven by choice, as well as a lower-income tier of workers potentially stuck in informal employment."

Prices are typically set by market forces. However, these forces can be influenced by oligopolistic practices, and the state may also establish price limits for foodstuffs. The national currency in Mauritania, the ouguiya (MRO), can only be exchanged within the country.

Market
organization

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The Mauritanian economy exhibits a strong tendency toward oligopoly. A small group of businessmen and their families control the majority of large firms, establishing an oligopolistic position in sectors such as banking, fishery, public infrastructure and construction, the import-export of consumer goods and foodstuffs, telecommunications, and insurance. A 2020 World Bank report highlighted the presence of “implicit cartels that raise input costs and limit the availability of diverse products,” while advising the government to diminish their influence.

Politically, the fate of the conglomerates can fluctuate. This was the case for Ould Bouamatou during the Ould Abdel Aziz presidency, and prior to him, Ould Abdellahi, Abdou Maham and Ould Noueigued (though for a much shorter duration). More recently, an influential businessman, Bahay Ould Gadda, who is a member of one of the dominant conglomerates that controls Mauritania’s economy and whose name was mentioned in the parliamentary report on corruption during the Ould Abdel Aziz presidency, was arrested in late 2020 and subsequently released without further explanation. His group’s public contracts were then reinstated. In all these instances, their arrests should not be interpreted as part of antitrust or anti-corruption campaigns but rather as political maneuvers aimed at neutralizing real or potential competitors.

Mauritania is not a member of the International Competition Network, and it does not have a fair trading or competition agency. The nearest agency is the Market Surveillance Committee, which is located in the Ministry of Commerce. The committee was established in 2000 but has been relatively inactive since then. However, it was re-energized in September 2021, primarily to combat price speculation in the face of increasing inflation and food supply issues. Additionally, there is the National Commission for the Control of Public Procurement.

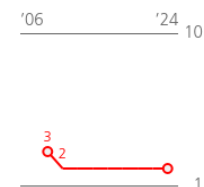
During the period under review, no significant liberalization reforms of foreign trade were undertaken. Additionally, there can be notable disparities between the official objectives of a reform and its implementation. This is evident in the case of the establishment, in 2013, of the Nouadhibou Free Trade Zone (FTZ), the port through which iron ore is exported. While the FTZ was established to facilitate international trade, a parliamentary investigation into the Ould Abdel Aziz presidency revealed that it functioned more or less as a land speculation operation. Even the chair of the FTZ candidly admitted, in May 2021, that between 2013 and 2020 the FTZ had been “hijacked” by individuals with self-serving interests.

In 2020, a World Bank report stated that “the prevalence of non-tariff measures (NTMs) and the absence of clear procedures hinder trade” and that “Mauritania ranks second to last in the world in terms of the prevalence of NTMs.”

As a means of promoting regional trade, Mauritania agreed on a common external tariff with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), even though it is not a member of this regional organization. According to the WTO, Mauritania’s share of simple average MFN applied stood at 12 in 2021. The

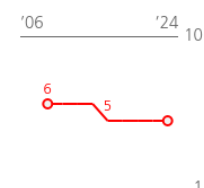
Competition policy

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Liberalization of foreign trade

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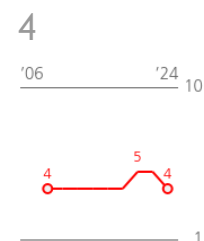
parliamentary investigation into the presidency of Ould Abdel Aziz offered a rare but highly revealing glimpse into corrupt practices at the highest levels of the state. It demonstrated, among other things, how the government utilized export and import licenses as a critical political tool for patronage. There is little reason to believe that significant changes have taken place since 2019.

The Mauritanian banking system is relatively underdeveloped. There are 18 commercial banks in Mauritania (up from 10 in 2008). The five largest banks' share of total assets is 39%. As of 2021, there were 11.3 commercial bank branches per 100,000 adults, up from 4.2 in 2011 according to World Bank data. The IMF stated in 2021 that the capital adequacy ratio declined to 21% in September 2020 against 25% at the end of 2019.

A 2022 World Bank report noted that non-performing loans declined between 2010 and 2019 (from 45% to 21.5%), but they have steadily increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching 24.2% in June 2021 and 24.1% at the end of December 2021. The report also stated that the pool of delinquent loans is growing faster than healthy loans. Among several challenges the banking sector is facing, the report pointed out the “lack of prudent management of a significant number of banks.” Despite the 2018 law that aimed to reform the banking sector by imposing tighter entry conditions and rules of transparency, the report noted a lack of implementation of the law.

The effects of the re-denomination of the ouguiya in 2018 lasted only a few months – no volatility associated with the exchange rate was noticed after that. Regarding the banking rate, a 2022 World Bank report states that this rate was 16.9% in 2020 and up 37.7% if accounts in microfinance institutions (extended banking rate) are included. A positive trend, however, can be found in the Law on Electronic Payments that was passed by the National Assembly in July 2021 to boost and better secure electronic transactions. However, a worrying trend that affects the vast majority of citizens who work in the informal sector is that “the microfinance sector [...] has stopped growing and innovating because of funding constraints,” according to the 2022 World Bank report. This confirms the banking sector's weak inclusion of marginalized groups, mostly women, young people, and ethnic and status groups (including Haratin).

Banking system



8 | Monetary and fiscal stability

The independence of Mauritania's central bank has often been a source of concern. The governor is appointed by presidential decree and is frequently replaced before completing their (then) five-year term. In 2018, a law was passed to enhance its independence: the governor's term has been extended to six years (renewable once), and the president can only remove the governor after a minimum of two-thirds of the bank's General Council has voted in favor of the governor's dismissal.

A new governor of the central bank of Mauritania was appointed in January 2020. However, he was replaced after two years, in March 2022, by Mohamed Lemine Ould Dhehbi. In September 2020, three new general directorates were added to the organization. The extent to which these reforms have improved the central bank's independence remains to be seen.

A document published in 2021 by the Observatory for Civic Participation and Freedom raised concerns about embezzlement practices involving officials at the central bank of Mauritania and other high-ranking officials outside of the bank during the Ould Abdel Aziz presidency. This document also addressed the issue of the bank's true independence in relation to political authorities.

With respect to exchange rates, as explained by a 2022 World Bank report, "CBM operates a managed foreign exchange regime." Its exchange rate policy is also counterweighted by the significance of the black market. The 2022 budget deficit, coupled with the decrease of iron ore prices, contributes to the depreciation of the ouguiya.

External shocks – including the Russian invasion of Ukraine but also the frequent significant changes in world commodity prices – are a constant threat to Mauritania's price stability. This is especially true given the fact that Mauritania imports around 70% of its foodstuff.

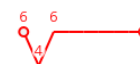
Inflation (CPI) has varied over the last 10 years, from 4.9% in 2012 to 1.5% in 2016, and up to 3% in 2018 and 3.6% in 2021. It is estimated to reach 9.6% in 2022, due to a significant rise in food prices and crude oil in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine.

The ouguiya is not pegged to a foreign currency. The exchange rate was \$1 = MRU 36 in 2021 and MRU 37 in 2022. There are no figures on the real effective exchange rate index for Mauritania.

Monetary stability

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have shaken Mauritania's fiscal stability. The current account balance was -\$807.6 million in 2021 (compared to -\$576 million in 2020). Public debt was 51.7% of GDP in 2021 (compared to 55.8% in 2020) and the total debt service was \$414 million in 2021 (compared to \$292.7 million in 2020), although the external debt decreased to \$4,818 million in 2021 from \$5,710 million in 2020. Government consumption increased from 12.9% of GDP in 2020 to 14.6% in 2021. Mauritania's total reserve increased from \$1,493 million in 2020 to \$2,038 million in 2021. Regarding revenue, the decline in iron ore and gold prices in 2022, as well as a drop in fishing exports, proved to be challenging.

In August 2021, Kuwait agreed to restructure its long-standing passive debt, which amounted to \$990 million. The debt dated back to the first Gulf War in 1990–91 and amounted to less than \$100 million at the time. The restructuring involved canceling 95% of the accumulated interest due. This proposal had initially been attempted by President Ould Abdel Aziz in 2019, although Aziz had failed to finalize the agreement with Kuwait. Between April and July 2022, Saudi Arabia proceeded to lend \$400 million (\$300 million in April and then \$100 million in June) to support Mauritania's "reform efforts in the area of public finance budget" and infrastructure projects. In January 2023, the government announced an agreement with the IMF on an \$86.9 million Extended Credit Facility and Extended Fund Facility.

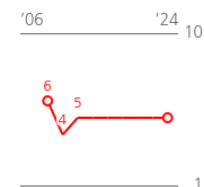
9 | Private Property

The constitution protects private property (Article 15). Furthermore, the reform of the Code of Investments in 2016 further consolidates the protection of private property. One crucial aspect of private property, particularly in a country like Mauritania where agriculture and livestock play an essential role for a significant portion of the population, is land ownership. The 1983 Law on Land Tenure, along with a 2000 decree, regulates land transactions. However, these frameworks, as well as the concept of private property, conflict with collective land rights. The state-sponsored violence against Black Africans between 1989 and 1991 was largely driven by disputes over land, with the Mauritanian state asserting its ownership, and right to sell land to private individuals and businesses (which, both at that time and presently, are predominantly White Moor entrepreneurs).

In recent years, clashes have erupted after private investors – often foreign companies and nationals – were able to buy pieces of land that local communities claimed belonged to them. One notorious case was the attribution of 3,000 hectares of land to the Arab Authority for Agricultural Investment and Development and some Mauritanian partners (region of Boghe). Although the state usually sides with private investors and individuals, this time the pressure was too great, and the president canceled the deal in June 2021. In this case, and in other smaller cases in the same region, mobilization from local communities was very strong, and signals from some

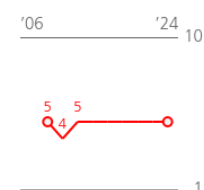
Fiscal stability

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Property rights

5



influential political figures from the Senegal River Valley were probably clearly understood at the highest levels. At the end of January 2023, the president stated that the government would create new legal tools to address land tenure conflicts. It remains to be seen if this will translate into concrete mechanisms that can both protect collective rights over private rights and promote agricultural production.

Private companies are permitted and protected under Article 15 of the constitution and the Code of Investments. In recent years, liberalization policies have been implemented, but they coexist with major state regulations. One example of these regulations is the ongoing licensing regime, which requires businesses to purchase licenses in order to operate officially in almost any sector of the economy. Unfortunately, this license regime tends to favor clientelistic practices. A rare and short-lived opportunity to glimpse the informal practices that arise within the licensing regime occurred during the parliamentary commission that investigated the Ould Abdel Aziz presidency. The commission's report uncovered numerous cases of clientelistic practices deeply ingrained within the licensing regime, involving both state officials, and private individuals and companies.

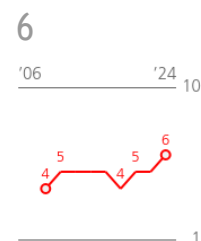
The government has not privatized any state-owned enterprises during the review period. However, in November 2022, the minister of petroleum and mines declared that the government was considering privatizing the national electricity company, SOMELEC. In December 2022, the government announced that it planned to privatize the national gas company, SOMAGAZ. The state's share will decrease from 72% to 35%, and the remaining 65% will be sold to the private sector. The largest company in the country, SNIM, is a state-owned iron ore extraction company. It is 78.35% owned by the state and is the largest employer, after the public service, with approximately 5,000 employees.

10 | Welfare Regime

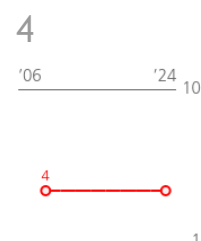
Due to Mauritania's bifurcated economy, the small employment sector, which covers the resource extraction industries and public administration, provides some welfare provisions. This contrasts with the vast majority of the population in the informal urban and agro-pastoral sectors, who mainly rely on safety nets provided by the government's cash transfer program, NGOs and international (U.N. agency) aid programs, as well as immediate and extended family networks.

The government spends 1.2% of GDP on health care. The latest (2021) UNDP data indicates that life expectancy is 65.1 years old, with a mortality rate of 71 per 1,000 live births for children under the age of five (latest available year is 2020), compared to 96 10-years earlier. Additionally, the infant mortality rate is 49 per 1,000 live births.

Private enterprise



Social safety nets



A major welfare program for the most vulnerable sections of the population, called Taazour, was created in November 2019 by President Ould Ghazouani. One specific objective of Taazour is to provide support to Haratin. Notably, in 2021, Taazour established a health care program to assist families in extreme poverty, which was especially important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In January 2023, the government announced that 88,000 families had benefited from the program since 2021, falling short of the original target of 100,000. Following criticism regarding delays in Taazour's various projects and programs, its delegate attributed these setbacks to the involvement of different actors in their implementation, including contractors and monitoring offices, in April 2022.

The effects of the emergency social expenses put in place to combat the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly diminished by now. According to a World Bank report from June 2022, Mauritania's COVID-19 Special Fund had executed approximately 91.9% of its allocated budget by December 2021.

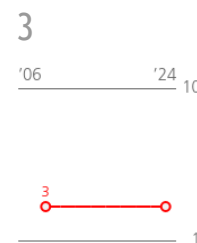
A significant portion of the population depends, for its well-being, on the remittances sent by relatives living and working abroad. According to the World Bank, remittances from the diaspora account for 2% of GDP. Rural areas often rely on foreign NGOs and hometown associations of migrants to develop better access to health facilities, schools and socioeconomic programs.

Barriers to participation and equal opportunities include gender, ethno-racial identities and social status (e.g., caste identities). Access to high-ranking public office is unequal for individuals of black African and Haratin backgrounds, especially within strategic ministries. The government publicly recognizes that Haratin are highly disadvantaged, although they use euphemisms such as “sequels of the past.” This recognition led to the creation in 2019 of the Taazour program, which provides a social safety net to Haratin households, although the program has faced significant delays and missed its target, as acknowledged by officials in April 2022.

With regard to gender equity, women constitute 18% of elected deputies in the National Assembly. Of the 27 women, 20 were elected from a national list specifically reserved for women. The limited representation of women in the National Assembly is the reason why the draft bill on the eradication of violence against women and girls, which was presented to the deputies in 2016, had not been adopted as of early 2023.

In February 2023, the United Nations Human Rights Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women completed its review of Mauritania's fourth periodic report. The committee's report states, “In the civil service, a gender breakdown of human resources shows that in category A (senior management), only 11.5% are women. Women are also under-represented in the middle management category, comprising only 27.8% of the total workforce, compared to 72.2% for men.”

Equal opportunity



Regarding education, the female-to-male enrollment ratio is 110% at both primary and secondary levels, which demonstrates a positive trend. However, this ratio drops significantly to 60% at the tertiary level. The gross enrollment ratio also declines substantially as girls advance in the school curriculum. Starting at 100.4% at the primary level, the gross enrollment ratio drops to 39.4% for the secondary level and to a mere 5.9% at the tertiary level. The female literacy rate stands at 43.5% compared to 63.7% for men.

Concerning employment, in the formal job market, women comprise only 30.7% of the labor force. Significant challenges persist despite the legal prohibition of female genital mutilation of minors in 2005. The implementation of the law has been weak, as evidenced by the government-sponsored Demographic and Health Survey (2019 – 2021). The survey revealed that 63% of women nationwide have been subjected to female genital mutilation (77% in rural areas and 51% in urban areas).

A similar situation prevails regarding the underage marriage of young girls, which constitutes a widespread practice despite the Personal Status Code's effort to regulate marital practices. According to a 2017 UNICEF report, 35% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 were married before the age of 18, with 15% married below the age of 15.

11 | Economic Performance

Mauritania's economic performance was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In 2021, GDP was valued at \$8,227 million, and GDP per capita (PPP) stood at \$5,592. GDP per capita growth in 2021 was -0.41%, a slight improvement from -4.4% in 2020.

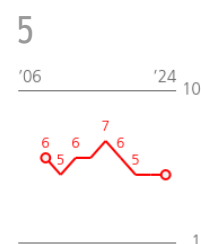
Foreign direct investments have fluctuated significantly. FDI stood at 0.2% of GDP in 2021, compared to 11.7% in 2020 and -11.2% in 2019. Most investments went directly into the extractive industries (e.g., iron ore, gold, oil and the expanding natural gas exploration sector) as well as infrastructure projects.

The current account balance dropped from -\$576 million in 2020 to -\$807.8 million in 2021. Inflation increased to 3.6% in 2021 but is estimated to be 11% in 2022. Unemployment remained at the same level in 2020 (11.3%) and 2021 (11.5%).

Unemployment numbers, however, remain uncertain. In 2018, the official number was 10.4%, but a World Bank report that year stated it was probably closer to 30%. Gross capital formation increased from 41.8% of GDP in 2020 to 57.2% in 2021.

For its part, the public debt has decreased from 55.8% of GDP in 2020 to 51.7% in 2021. During the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, debt service obligations were deferred under the G20 DSSI (Debt Service Suspension Initiative). They were, however, restarted in 2022.

Output strength



12 | Sustainability

Located in one of the most precarious environments in the world, the Sahel, Mauritania faces significant socioeconomic challenges and constraining environmental conditions. The country is severely affected by climate change, including desertification, major rainfall deficits and frequent droughts. Meanwhile, the capital city, which hosts about a third of the country's population, is at high risk of rising sea levels.

To enhance its legal capacity for environmental protection, the government adopted the Code of the Environment in 2000. In January 2021, the National Assembly approved a bill paving the way for the creation of the Police of the Environment, which will be integrated into the Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development. This police force will comprise two different corps. First, a rural corps (a “water, forest and hunting” corps) will be tied to the military and will have the authority to carry weapons, similar to practices in many former French colonies. The rural corps will also be responsible for enforcing regulations against illegal hunting and poaching. Second, an environmental inspection corps, staffed by civilians rather than military personnel, has a more urban focus. Its primary objective is to improve the enforcement of environmental regulations, particularly in industrial and mining areas. In March 2022, for instance, this corps inspected and suspended the activities at scrap metal recycling facilities.

Mauritania is a member of the transnational Great Green Wall Initiative, which has sought to reforest 100 million hectares of degraded land and halt the desertification of the Sahel region since 2007. Mauritania has its own National Agency for the Great Green Wall, and the country hosts the headquarters of the Pan-African Agency of the Great Green Wall. The director of the Green Wall National Agency was dismissed in April 2022, arrested four months later, along with the agency's accountant and some partners, and all were accused of embezzlement.

Mauritania has joined other international initiatives. For example, the country joined the U.N. Climate Action for Jobs Initiative in July 2022. In 2020, it pledged to contribute to the Paris Climate Agreement by reducing its GHG emissions by 22.3% by 2030, although it revised that target to 11% in 2021. The 2022 Environmental Performance Index ranked Mauritania 165th out of 180 countries (two places higher than in 2020), with a score of 28.1 out of 100.

Environmental
policy

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The Mauritanian government spent 1.9% of GDP on education in 2020, compared to 2.3% in 2013. The estimated adult literacy rate is 67% for 2021, up from 53% in 2017. The gross enrollment ratio at the primary level was 94% in 2020, but 31% at the secondary level in 2018 (latest available data) – which is, nonetheless, an improvement on the 22% in 2012 – and only 6% at the tertiary level in 2020. More globally, Mauritania’s score in the U.N. Education Index was 0.424 in 2021.

The Association of Female Heads of Households, with some partners, produced a report on education in 2018, which noted that “the Mauritanian education system is segregated and discriminatory along social-economic or territorial lines, and fails to correct inequalities in society.” That report also found that “elementary school completion rates range from 18% (for the poorest) to 75% (for the richest) in Mauritania.”

Private schools have mushroomed but only serve a minority of citizens. In 1999, 2% of primary students were enrolled in a private school, a number that jumped to 15% in 2016. As a 2020 World Bank report found, students in public schools perform significantly worse than those in the private sector. The report also identified four major deficiencies in the Mauritanian education system, including “extremely low levels of teacher competence and a shortage of qualified teachers; poor management of the sector and high levels of teacher absenteeism; poor condition of school facilities and inadequate learning materials; lack of continuity in the education cycle.”

To address some of these shortcomings, the National Assembly adopted a new law on education in August 2022, the latest in a long series of education reforms in the country. The reform was criticized by representatives of non-Arabic-speaking minorities, who argue that even if the new law officially provides more space for their languages, the lack of resources to support its implementation will contribute to the Arabization of the country.

The creation, in December 2022, of the Institute for the Promotion and Teaching of National Languages is a step in the right direction. However, it remains to be seen if the government will inject more resources into the education system and the implementation of reforms. Moreover, the construction of a new university campus, with a capacity of about 10,000 students, began in January 2023.

Education policy /
R&D

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Governance

I. Level of Difficulty

The structural constraints on governance in Mauritania are high. As a Sahelian country, Mauritania faces immense structural constraints, including a very large territory, very low population density (4.4 million people, at a density of five people per square km) and a harsh Sahelian climate. The reduction of fertile land since the 1950s has resulted in desert and semi-desert areas now constituting 90% of the total land area, compared to two-thirds in the past.

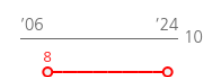
In addition, Mauritania faced significant terrorism in its own territory between 2005 and 2011. Even though terrorist attacks within Mauritania have declined since 2011, instability surged in several nearby countries (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) during the 2010s and 2020s. The already impoverished region of Hodh ech-Chargui, near the Malian border, hosts 90,000 Malian refugees in the Mbera camp (as of August 2022), about 80,000 of whom are Malian Tuaregs and Arabs. The militarization of the Sahel since the mid-2000s has diverted immensely scarce resources toward the military and away from development.

Since its inception, the country has been governed by various forms of authoritarianism, which does not facilitate the development of autonomous and vocal groupings of citizens. On the formal and official side, there are very few organizations that have clear mobilization capacities and can make themselves heard. The most vocal ones include organizations devoted to the defense of Haratin, as well as a few women's organizations and trade unions in the underdeveloped formal sector of the economy.

Scholars have demonstrated that informal forms of associations constitute the main form of organization for civil society, including Sufi brotherhoods, reformist Islamic associations, hometown associations, small microcredit associations ("tontines") and the very important tribal networks. They provide help to their members, and can engage the state on social, economic and political issues. However, many of them are also relatively segmented, making it harder to mobilize large sectors of society, and others, such as formal associations or networks, are often hierarchically structured along caste (or status), gender or generational lines.

Structural
constraints

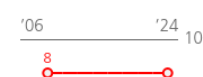
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Civil society
traditions

8



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The level of social, ethnic and religious tensions has waxed and waned over the years. But the potential for conflict has remained a constant, in large part because the root causes of these problems have not been fundamentally addressed. Although the country is 100% Muslim, the rise of armed groups fighting on behalf of Islam in the country and across the region (generally labeled as jihadist groups) since 2005 represents a significant threat, even if they are not numerically large. Ethno-racial and status polarization remains a critical issue. Haratin (freed slaves) activists who become too vocal in the eyes of the government are automatically repressed by security forces, as seen in the arrests of Haratin activists from the IRA movement. The recognition of this movement in 2021 could lower tensions, but not if the root causes of the problem are not seriously addressed. The consistent marginalization of black African ethnic minorities is another key dynamic. The 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects military personnel (who all come from the Moor community) involved in the grave human rights violations against black Africans between 1989 and 1991, remains in effect, despite local organizations calling for its revocation.

Conflict intensity

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II. Governance Performance

14 | Steering Capability

Prioritization is a prerogative of the president given the hyper-presidentialist nature of the regime. Priorities are in large part defined by national and geopolitical security threats, a vulnerable economy based on a small number of export commodities and agriculture, and internal threats within the circle of high-ranking officers.

Three main priorities stand out in the agenda of the Ould Ghazouani presidency, which for the most part echo those of his predecessors. These priorities are largely set in the short and medium term.

First, given that ultimately power resides in the military and that access to power is mainly facilitated by way of a coup, with the exception of the 2019 succession between two comrades-in-arms, preventing coups and maintaining the loyalty of key officers takes up much of the leader's attention. At this point, the current president is in part focused on ensuring that his predecessor and his predecessor's allies no longer constitute a threat to him. The actual democratization of the regime is not a priority. Though this priority is not institutionalized in the formal sense, its informal nature does not make it any less critical.

Secondly, in terms of security, one of Mauritania's key priorities is to navigate the delicate balance between the two competing regional powers, Morocco and Algeria, which may take punitive action if they perceive Mauritania to favor one over the other. In a similar vein, a major focus is on preventing armed Islamic groups, some

Question
Score

Prioritization

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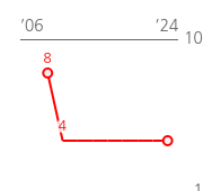
of which include Mauritians in their ranks, from perpetrating attacks on national territory. This focus has involved rebuilding the country's military forces, and establishing profitable alliances with Western powers and some regional neighbors to obtain military, financial, intelligence and strategic support. While this security priority is also informally implemented, there is a more formal, institutionalized process that has involved modernizing the military. For example, Mauritania cooperates with international partners and regional organizations to build security alliances, obtain training and secure more modern equipment.

The third priority is to attract international support in the extractive industries (minerals, oil and gas) and in the development sector. Of the three priorities, this one is more formally institutionalized, given the dense linkages with foreign public and private partners. However, as revealed by the unprecedented and very informative parliamentary report on clientelistic practices during the Ould Abdel Aziz presidency, the formalization of these development priorities can coexist with immensely important informal patterns. This objective has been successful but has not generated inclusive growth. In January 2023, the IMF announced that it had “approved 42-month arrangements under the Extended Credit Facility and Extended Fund Facility in the amount of \$86.9 million for the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The Executive Board decision enables an immediate disbursement of \$21.7 million.” In the extractive sector, foreign partners are involved in the development of the Greater Tortue Ahmeyim gas field (co-owned by Mauritania and Senegal).

The peaceful succession from one president to another in 2019 was in itself an indication that the prioritization of preventing coups was successful, given that, this time, there was no coup. After the election, the ensuing political and legal battle between the two retired generals, which has resulted in the exclusion of the former president and the consolidation of power around the new president and his allies, confirms a pattern that goes back to the 1970s. The government has also been successful in preventing the return of violent armed groups on Mauritanian soil, although leaked documents published in the media 10 years ago suggest that this may have come at the price of ambiguous deals with these groups. The actual implementation of development policies is often hindered by clientelistic problems, as well as the vested interests of powerful actors and networks. For instance, despite a strong legal arsenal aimed at tackling slavery-related practices, very few “masters” have been tried and even fewer have been sentenced to long prison sentences, mostly due to the state's lack of resources, a lack of judicial willingness and tribal connections that serve to subvert the judicial process.

Implementation

4



Policy learning and innovation can be used to promote the common good but also to ensure the regime’s survival. Considering the authoritarian nature of the regime and the historical role of intra-regime coups for the presidency, policy learning can mean adapting to challenging conditions in order to ensure regime survival. Consequently, keeping intra-regime rivals as well as opponents under control is a key objective that requires innovation and learning. The current president has so far succeeded in this regard.

With respect to “formal” policy learning, it is undeniable that the current president and his government have displayed strong skills in adapting their communication strategy. In contrast to previous governments that silenced and suppressed Mauritania’s main problems, the current executive has spoken boldly about the problems the country is facing, including the exclusion of Haratin, corruption in the state apparatus, the weak education system and the lack of reconciliation, among other central themes. This candid and more realistic rhetoric is rather exceptional for Mauritania. However, the conversion of public discourse into the actual implementation of concrete policies that aim to address the country’s main problems is rather weak. For instance, from an economic perspective, there are no clear signs that the government has sought to directly tackle the country’s dependence on the extractive sector. As a 2022 World Bank report noted, “overreliance on natural resources has left the economy undiversified and vulnerable to global shocks, such as the shocks of COVID-19 and the Ukrainian conflict,” adding that “in the last decade, export diversification has declined in Mauritania, where the export diversification index rose by more than 10%, increasing the country’s vulnerability to global shocks on commodity markets.”

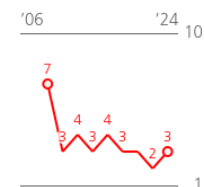
The government has learned from past experiences and succeeded where its regional neighbors have failed, specifically in the domain of security. It has been 12 years since the last terrorist attack on Mauritanian soil, making it the most successful case of policy learning in this regard.

15 | Resource Efficiency

The rare window opened by the parliamentary investigation into the Ould Abdel Aziz presidency confirmed researchers’ analyses that the use of administrative personnel has historically been undermined by political intrusions. The merging of administrative and political functions is frequent. High-ranking civil servants are very often also members of the ruling party (the UPR until 2022 and the EI INSAF since then), which leads to the substantial challenges of corruption, embezzlement and clientelism. The frequent reshuffling of positions is employed to ensure the loyalty of various elites. However, this compromises administrative efficiency and circumvents the implementation of meritocratic procedures in the appointment of public servants. This inefficient use of assets is partly countered by auditing

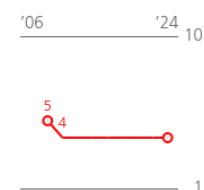
Policy learning

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Efficient use of assets

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campaigns led by the General State Inspectorate (IGE) and the Court of Accounts (Cour des comptes), among other auditing offices. These agencies, however, are directly or indirectly under the authority of the executive, which means that there is a limit to what they can do.

Budget planning and implementation in Mauritania have become more transparent than previously. The media actively disseminated data on the forthcoming budget in December 2022 and shed light on debates among elected representatives of the ruling party and the opposition. Government consumption has not fluctuated too much over roughly the last decade (from 10.5% of GDP in 2011 to 14.6% in 2021). In addition, the level of public debt (as a percentage of GDP) is manageable, although it increased from 38.8% in 2011 to 51.7% in 2021. In 2021, an increase in tax revenues helped ensure the fiscal balance remained sound. The revised budget published in July 2022 showed increasing expenditures, partly explained by the government's need to support the population as it faces rising fuel and food costs.

Given that legislative and local elections will be held in 2023 and the presidential election the year after, an increase in public expenditure and thus a deviation from the draft 2023 budget is more than likely – a trend that has been observed in previous election years.

The 2017 constitutional reform created a new administrative level, the regional councils, in an attempt to further decentralize the administrative and political system, at least officially. The Regional Development Fund was also established, which benefited from international funding, along with other programs set up to support the poorest towns and communes. Interestingly, all 13 councils were won by the ruling party in September 2018. Furthermore, some observers have questioned the regional councils' almost complete financial dependence on the central government (through the Regional Development Fund), their lack of autonomy vis-à-vis the central government (the prime minister pledged that this would be implemented between 2023 and 2024), the capacity of the regional entities to fulfill their duties and their informal function as local chambers of patronage.

Challenges to policy coordination derive from the very nature of this authoritarian regime. The regime's coordination style combines a hyper-presidentialist system, in which informal and formal decision-making is centered around the presidency, with patronage networks that sprawl over a divided society. Thus, the government has difficulties coordinating and adjudicating between conflicting interests.

An example of this is the fight against slavery. The government has conceded ground to vocal civil society organizations and international pressures, and has adopted stricter laws, while also putting in place a social welfare and development program (Taazour) to support Haratin communities. These formal and legal improvements, however, have been counterbalanced by the power of clientelism and the workings of tribal solidarity. As noted in the U.N. Special Rapporteur's report in 2022, few

Policy
coordination

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individuals accused of slavery have been sentenced, and those who have been sentenced have either been released before completing their full sentence or have escaped their trials.

In the field of security, policy coordination has shown greater efficiency, as suggested by the absence of any violent attacks in Mauritania over the last 12 years in contrast to other states in the Sahel region. Following the attacks on military barracks in the period from 2005 to 2011, which profoundly shocked the security forces and the country more generally, observers note that the Mauritanian security forces have undergone a comprehensive and highly efficient modernization process over the last decade. This has included the modernization of basic military infrastructures (e.g., barracks, new military posts and an increase in military transportation), organization (e.g., new security units and improved salaries) and practices (e.g., improved training, both domestic and abroad). This process has been made possible in part by the development of robust bilateral and multilateral partnerships, including the G5 Sahel. Moreover, the government has increased the military budget and obtained significant military support from international partners.

The modernization of the security sector coincided with an astute deradicalization strategy of (actual and potential) radical individuals, which involved the efficient use of intelligence networks that reach into Arabic-speaking and Tuareg communities in Mali. These reforms all happened under the supervision of the two closest military leaders the country has known in recent times, the former and current heads-of-state who have recently become foes.

A leading story dominating Mauritania's headlines since early 2020 has been the parliamentary investigation into the massive corruption scandals under former president Ould Abdel Aziz. He and 316 other people were identified in the 800-page report. This eventually led to his arrest, and three years later, to the opening of his trial on January 25, 2023. The scope and publicity of this investigation are unprecedented in Mauritania. It may signal the new government's disposition to finally implement thorough anti-corruption reforms. But one must not forget that the recurring motto of the Ould Abdel Aziz regime was precisely to "fight against corruption."

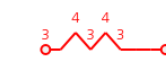
Given the nature of Mauritania's political system and the centrality of intra-military power struggles, the investigation and trial of the former president sounds more like a strategy to neutralize a potential rival. Furthermore, of the 317 people identified in the original parliamentary report, only 11, including the former president, are currently being prosecuted. The remaining 306 individuals, many of whom continue to hold key positions in the state apparatus, have been spared by the justice system.

The main auditing agencies, the General State Inspectorate and the Court of Accounts, have continued their auditing campaigns. In 2019, after almost 13 years without making its yearly reports available, the Cour des Comptes finally made some

Anti-corruption
policy

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of its reports publicly available (2010 to 2017). Its 2018 report was presented to the president in 2021 but has not been made public. However, it did publicize its special report on the use of the “special fund for social solidarity and the fight against coronavirus.”

The Commission de transparence financière dans la vie publique (Commission for Financial Disclosure in Public Affairs) also officially contributes to the fight against corruption by collecting the self-declarations of the 500 highest-ranking civil servants and officials’ assets and properties. These declarations must be submitted at the beginning and at the end of one’s term. Between 2013 and 2019, no declarations were made public. The new president provided such a declaration in December 2019, five months after his election.

16 | Consensus-Building

Major political actors do not conceive of democracy as a goal to achieve. The military, which has been in charge since 1978 through active or retired officers, does not appear willing to relinquish power. However, the ruling military elite have agreed to introduce some form of competition, excluding the highest political office. The presidential election of June 2019 confirmed the consensus of competitive authoritarianism among Mauritanian elites, which has been in place since 1991. It also introduced a new development in the shape of a peaceful transition from one officer to another, rather than via a coup. The fact that the succession did not depend on a coup could establish a positive precedent. Nonetheless, this does not alter the authoritarian consensus regarding who can govern the country and how. On the other hand, all opposition parties, including the Islamist party Tawassoul, which regained its position as the leading opposition party after the 2018 elections, are committed to democracy.

In addition, in this competitive authoritarian regime, the use of overt violence is less frequent than in other authoritarian regimes, where opponents and journalists are murdered or jailed on a large scale. Censorship of the press and journalists is no longer employed systematically.

Compared to the violent years of the 1980s and 1990s, the current regime is more moderate and certainly less authoritarian in its dealing with civil society, opposition parties and citizens more generally. To borrow from the usual nomenclature, the regime has transitioned from a closed or hegemonic authoritarian regime to a competitive authoritarian regime. However, the regime’s repression of IRA activists between 2014 and 2020 serves as a reminder that it is still not prepared to allow peaceful but vocal actors to strongly criticize it.

There is a significant consensus surrounding the principle of a market economy. However, how one defines that market economy matters greatly. If one insists on the rule of law as a mechanism that regulates market relations, then this would not describe officials’ consensual view of a market economy. Embezzlement practices

Consensus on goals



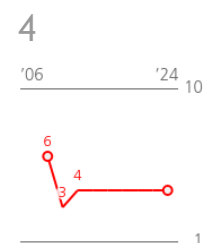
during the Ould Abdel Aziz regime, despite Aziz portraying himself as an anti-corruption president, have been substantiated by a parliamentary commission. Furthermore, competition within the market is hindered by the presence of powerful conglomerates connected to the president, high-ranking military officials and other businessmen, as well as by tribal and clan networks. In addition, the extent to which the market economy can be harnessed to effect pro-poor outcomes raises major questions, given the immense gap that exists between a small but wealthy minority and a very large portion of the population that lives in conditions of extreme poverty, most of whom are from specific social groups.

The 2019 presidential election, which saw the victory of retired general Ould Ghazouani, who had occupied the highest position in the military apparatus during the reign of his predecessor and friend, further reinforces the strength of the military as an anti-democratic actor. This latest round of elections confirmed a pattern already at play under the Ould Taya regime (1984 – 2005), namely that the military officer who stages a coup will eventually garner international legitimacy by winning an election he cannot lose. Furthermore, the military officer who secures power through a coup will consolidate his grip on power through his party's dominance over elected assemblies, in part by weakening his predecessor (who, himself, had done the same thing to his predecessor). Although the ruling party changed its name in 2022 from UPR to El INSAF, the new party's internal functioning remains the same: as a political machine aggregating support for the president, while also an arena in which elites compete against each other for the best positions in the party, and access clientelist resources that flow through formal and informal networks. Nevertheless, the new regime is more tolerant of competition and less prone to the use of violence. Despite the more competitive nature of the system, reformists have failed to bring forward the following two basic criteria of a democracy: conducting open and fair elections for the executive and preventing interference from elected institutions. In fact, the military continues to be the most powerful institution in the country.

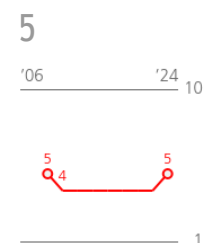
The Mauritanian political leadership has not been able, or perhaps not willing, to effectively depolarize the country's structural tensions. A broad consensus across ethno-racial dividing lines has not materialized. Though a demographic minority, "White Moors" (or Bidhan) control most key positions in significant state institutions such as the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Interior. White Moors also control most key positions in the military and intelligence apparatus.

The plight of "former slaves," the Haratin, remains a major cleavage that continues to undermine the social fabric of the country. Black Africans are also under-represented in key positions within the state apparatus, and past human rights violations against black Africans have not been fully addressed, with retired and current military officers enjoying impunity despite their involvement in past atrocities. Although there have been some symbolic appointments (e.g., the current prime minister is from the Haratin community), significant challenges persist.

Anti-democratic actors



Cleavage / conflict management



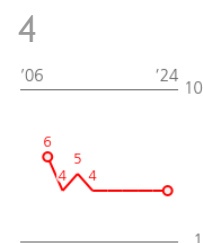
While some socioeconomic programs specifically target impoverished communities, including the Haratin, such programs have existed for years without delivering tangible results.

Since assuming office, President Ould Ghazouani has shifted government discourse away from official jargon and euphemisms that conceal blatant inequalities in the country, especially marginalization of the Haratin, violence against women, extreme poverty and the struggling education system that disproportionately impacts minorities. These changes may contribute to reducing polarization along identity lines. However, as the end of his first term approaches, the president has not demonstrated a clear ability (or perhaps willingness) to implement comprehensive reforms that effectively address these pressing issues.

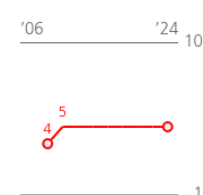
Formal civil society organizations – including trade unions, domestic NGOs, local associations and the media – can express themselves through the media. Furthermore, trade unions are able to protest and call strikes, as demonstrated during the period under review. In addition, they publish reports or memoranda on various sociopolitical problems. However, the degree of their genuine inclusion in national decision-making remains limited. Decision-making remains highly centralized around the presidency. International partners – including U.N. agencies, partner countries and international NGOs – do include civil society organizations, but their impact on decisions remains difficult to assess, and the actual composition of these “civil society” actors must be analyzed carefully. At the local level, informal groups and networks (e.g., tribal and lineage networks, village associations, and religious networks) do participate in various ways in some decision-making.

Current and past governments in Mauritania have faced challenges in acknowledging historical and ongoing exclusion, and acts of violence against the Haratin and black Africans. Some progress has been made, particularly regarding legal reforms and social programs. For example, legal reforms have been introduced that criminalize slavery. In addition, social welfare programs have been implemented to provide support to the Haratin community. Furthermore, repatriation programs have been initiated to assist black African refugees who were expelled between 1989 and 1991. However, the flawed implementation of these laws and programs, and the systematic unwillingness to punish perpetrators of human rights violations constitute a major obstacle to reconciliation.

Public
consultation



Reconciliation



17 | International Cooperation

On the development front, the Mauritanian government collaborates closely with its international partners, including U.N. agencies, the World Bank, the IMF, regional banks (African Development Bank; Islamic Development Bank), and foreign government development aid agencies. Their relationships have been steady and strong. One central issue, however, has to do with the implementation of development programs, especially those regarding inclusive growth, job creation and the redistribution of profits from the extractive sector. The gap between a small, very wealthy elite and the vast majority of the population is striking. The IMF, which publishes reports that are generally diplomatic in tone, stated in February 2023 that “considerable challenges remain to achieve sustainable and more inclusive growth.”

On the security front, the government cooperates with foreign partners (France and the United States) as well as international bodies and shows signs that it does seek to secure long-term stability on its territory. Analysts and NGOs have, for many years, underlined the problem related to the capture of international support for patronage by individuals close to the president’s inner circle as well as members associated with the ruling party. The 2020 parliamentary investigation commission that scrutinized the previous president’s regime confirmed what these analysts and NGOs had been saying. There are no strong signals that the central government and its most important partners are committed to changing this situation.

Despite the competitive authoritarian nature of the Mauritanian regime, all international partners thoroughly collaborate with the government, which is generally perceived as a credible partner. On the security front, Mauritania is a very credible partner of the G5 Sahel organization, which includes Mauritania, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso (Mali decided to suspend its participation in May 2022). As a proof of Mauritania’s credibility, the G5 Sahel Permanent Secretariat as well as the G5 Sahel Defense College are located in Nouakchott. Furthermore, the Mauritanian president is about to become the new chair of the G5 Sahel, and its main task will be to convince Mali to return to the organization.

With the post-coup Malian crisis and the French exit from Mali, the G5 Sahel has lost its traction. In particular, the further development, if not the very existence on the ground, of its Joint Force is questionable. But this cannot be blamed on Mauritania, which has kept its credibility intact.

The government hosts and collaborates with representatives of all inter-state organizations regularly. When the U.N. Special Rapporteur came to Nouakchott in May 2022, investigating the sensitive issue of slavery, the government collaborated with him. With respect to the development of a liberal economy, the government has convinced international partners and foreign investors of its commitment to progress in this area and fully collaborates with them.

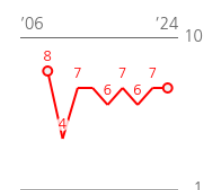
Effective use of support

5



Credibility

7



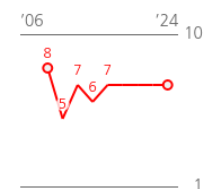
The Mauritanian government cooperates with all its regional neighbors and has a solid track record. Regional cooperation is now mostly a question of security, even though the drivers of insecurity are mostly of a social, political and economic nature.

The Mauritanian government has skillfully navigated the Malian crisis. As Mauritania is not an ECOWAS member, it did not have to participate in the sanctions against the Malian junta. In fact, it even acted as an intermediary in Mali's import-export efforts amidst sanctions, signing a commercial treaty with Mali in February 2022 to boost relations between the two countries. Even after Mauritanian citizens were killed by Malian forces in January and June 2022, and others were kidnapped in March 2022 (probably by Malian forces, though possibly by Wagner mercenaries), the Mauritanian government did not cut its relations with its neighbor, despite significant popular pressure to do so.

Mauritania must also maintain a precarious balance between the two rival powerhouses to the north, Morocco and Algeria, in a context where both try to weaken one another, interpreting Mauritania's friendly overtures toward either one as an attack against the other. The government so far has been agile in maintaining this difficult equilibrium. With Morocco, Mauritania sent its highest security officials (the armed forces chief of staff and national security general director) to Rabat in May and September 2022 to confirm the country's willingness to cooperate with the kingdom. With Algeria, the two countries held the first Algerian-Mauritanian Joint Security Commission in Nouakchott in January 2023, which focused on the intensification of their security coordination. Mauritania also moved forward the construction of a road, which will connect the two countries, between the town of Tindouf (Algeria), where Polisario Front refugees settled at the end of the 1970s, and the prominent Mauritanian mining town of Zouerate.

Regional cooperation

7



Strategic Outlook

The country is set to hold legislative, regional and local elections in 2023, followed by presidential elections in 2024. In the previous electoral round (2018 and 2019), a retired general and the party affiliated with the president again emerged victorious. It is crucial that the upcoming elections for the presidency, and national and local assemblies are conducted transparently and fairly. However, achieving these objectives will be difficult if the Ministry of Interior is granted extensive power in organizing the elections. Another key institution involved in the process, the National Independent Electoral Commission, is also subject to excessive influence from the regime. Out of its 11 members, six are appointed by the ruling party, while the opposition parties are responsible for appointing the remaining five. Furthermore, the chair of the commission held the position of minister of interior in the Ould Taya regime and was a governor during the period of violence against black Africans between 1990 and 1991. Similarly, the vice chair served as a legal adviser to former President Ould Taya and as chief of staff to General Ould Mohamed Vall (the leader of the junta from 2005 to 2007). To ensure the fairness of the elections, it is imperative that the NIEC be composed of non-partisan members.

Though to a much lesser extent, opposition parties are also at fault due to their internal rivalries. Some parties compromised with the government, whereas others held their line during talks over the forthcoming elections. To present an effective opposition, opposition parties must form a united bloc.

The parliamentary investigative commission that scrutinized acts of corruption during the Ould Abdel Aziz presidency has identified numerous concrete cases of corruption. It noted that laws and regulations to fight corruption often exist and are well-designed but are not enforced. There are two primary reasons for this. First, auditing agencies are too dependent on the president, usually because of nomination procedures. This political proximity makes it difficult for these agencies to perform their duties independently. Second, most of the auditing agencies lack the necessary resources, especially human resources. Therefore, auditing agencies must become officially autonomous from the executive and must obtain the necessary resources to be present across the territory. The parliamentary investigative commission has proven that, when given the mandate to do its job, it can perform quite well.

Marginalized ethno-racial communities, specifically the Haratin and the four different black African groups, should have fair access to all levels of the state apparatus, not just at junior and middle levels, including key ministries such as defense, interior and justice. The 1993 Law of Amnesty, which continues to protect security personnel from past human rights violations against black Africans, must be repealed to allow the country to move toward reconciliation. The issue of economic diversification must also be addressed.

Real diversification strategies are needed, including more support for the agro-pastoral sector, where 60% of the labor force is concentrated. With almost half of the population living in conditions of extreme poverty, the conditions for instability remain a major threat in this Sahelian environment. In Mauritania, as in most Sahelian countries, young people under 25 years old constitute roughly 60% of the population. Their integration into the labor market and the necessity of offering acceptable socioeconomic conditions should be a priority.